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United Nations reform: measures and proposals

Interaction between the United Nations, national
parliaments and the Inter-Parliamentary Union

Note verbale dated 26 June 2015 from the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

The Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to the United Nations presents its compliments to the Secretary-General of the United Nations and, in its capacity as Chair of the Governing Council of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, has the honour to forward herewith to the General Assembly the text (in English and French) of the document entitled "Report of the Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs", adopted by the 132nd Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, held in Hanoi on 31 March 2015 (see annex).

The Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of Bangladesh to the United Nations kindly requests the Office of the Secretary-General to circulate the present note verbale and its annex as a document of the seventieth session of the General Assembly, under items 124 and 125 of the preliminary list.

* A/70/50.



Annex to the note verbale dated 26 June 2015 from the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

[Original: English and French]

Report of the Standing Committee on United Nations Affairs

The Committee held three sittings under the chairmanship of its Vice-President, Mr. El Hassan Al Amin (Sudan).

Sitting 1: Interactive debate to mark the seventieth anniversary of the United Nations

Keynote speaker: Mr. L. Montiel, Assistant Secretary-General, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Discussants: Ms. B. Bishop, Speaker of the House of Representatives of Australia; Mr. M. Tommasoli, Permanent Observer of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance at the United Nations

Date: Sunday, 29 March (9.30 a.m. to 12.30 p.m.)

The debate focused on whether the United Nations was as relevant today as at the time of its founding in 1945. It concluded that the United Nations was needed more than ever today as the world faced a number of challenges that could not be met by individual States acting alone. On the other hand, the considerable record of accomplishment of the United Nations was not without blemish, owing in part to a lack of resources and political stalemate among Member States on specific issues. The United Nations as an organization could only deliver what Member States agreed to and were willing to support.

The United Nations could be credited for many things that helped Governments and people around the world in ways they did not always realize: the establishment of an international human rights framework, vital support for newly independent countries, whole new institutions of justice (international tribunals, the International Criminal Court), humanitarian assistance and peacekeeping operations that had helped save countless lives.

On the development front, the United Nations was responsible for finding common ground among countries on questions of global economic governance, including finance and trade, and for helping to put issues like climate change and sustainable development on the international agenda. The world conferences of the 1990s, the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the post-2015 development agenda, which included a new set of sustainable development goals (SDGs), were good illustrations of United Nations leadership.

Unfortunately, the United Nations had not been as effective at preventing conflicts and the spread of armaments around the world. It was not equipped to deal with the rising threat of non-State terrorist groups. Most United Nations resolutions failed to be fully implemented, and there was often a disconnect between Member State decisions and the actual wishes of people on the ground. Social media

advances had changed the methods of discourse since 1955. Some wondered if this posed a problem of legitimacy: did the United Nations really speak for the peoples, as implied by its Charter? It needed to address the cost efficiency of its operations, including the Secretariat, and ensure it was nimble enough to innovate when needed.

Many participants highlighted Security Council reform as a litmus test of United Nations efficiency and leadership. The veto power of a few members of the Council was undemocratic. Membership in the Council should be expanded to better reflect the expansion in General Assembly membership over the years. Other participants suggested that the Council had to respect the General Assembly's authority and avoid dealing with issues that were not clearly within its mandate.

At the end of the day, making the United Nations more relevant would require closer partnership with the world of parliaments. National Governments had two branches — the executive and the legislative — yet the "States" of the United Nations were represented by the executive branch only. While there was clearly a benefit to having each Member speak with only one voice (the Permanent Representative, a minister or the head of State), it was becoming urgent for that voice to include the views of parliamentarians. Parliamentarians, for their part, had a key role to play in holding Governments to account for their decisions at the United Nations. That was exactly what the partnership between the United Nations and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) was all about.

Sitting 2: Review of the field missions to examine interaction between United Nations country teams and national parliaments

Moderator: Mr. D. Dawson, Canada

Discussants: Ms. S. Lyimo, United Republic of Tanzania; Mr. O. Kyei-Mensah-Bonsu, Ghana; Ms. S. Beavers, Policy Adviser, Inclusive Political Processes Team, United Nations Development Programme

Date: Tuesday, 31 March (9 to 10.45 a.m.)

The sitting examined changes in the relationship between national parliaments and United Nations country teams over the years and provided guidance as to how that relationship could be strengthened further. Twenty years earlier, it would have been unthinkable for the United Nations to work with national parliaments instead of with the Government alone. As the role of parliaments in national development gained recognition, it had become common for country teams to reach out to parliament or for parliament to seek assistance from the United Nations.

IPU field missions in a number of countries had highlighted various aspects of the United Nations-parliament relationship. The most important was that the United Nations looked at parliaments from two perspectives: as recipients of assistance (capacity-building) and as development partners providing input for key processes such as the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, a unique operational plan prepared for each country in which a country team was present.

The balance between those two perspectives varied from country to country. However, it was a safe assumption that it was easier for a country team to relate to

parliament as a recipient of assistance than as a partner in development planning, which tended to be a function of the parliament's willingness to engage, but also of the Government's willingness to bring parliamentarians into discussions with the United Nations. Regardless, one objective of cooperation between the United Nations and the IPU should be to ensure that, wherever feasible, parliaments were consistently included in round tables and structured discussions with the Government.

Participants expressed strong appreciation for the field presence of the United Nations. United Nations assistance had made a real difference to parliaments, empowering members and staff alike with technical knowledge and policy advice. As a result, many parliaments reported feeling much better equipped today to hold their Governments to account. The discussion included examples of how United Nations teams had provided hands-on assistance and seminars to bolster the capacity of parliamentarians, particularly women, and increase their confidence as policymakers. Examples were given from the following countries: Cameroon, Ghana, India, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Myanmar, the United Republic of Tanzania and Viet Nam.

In an effort to become more effective development partners, many United Nations country teams were working to put their own house in order, primarily by merging the agencies making up the team into a single programme of work, a single budget and a single office. Called "One United Nations", that exercise was having good results.

Sitting 3: Assessment of parliaments' institutional capacities to mainstream the new sustainable development goals

Moderator: Mr. A. Motter, Senior Adviser, IPU

Discussants: Ms. Claudia Roth, Germany; Ms. Evita Nursanty, Indonesia; Ms. Laura Rojas, Mexico

Date: Tuesday, 31 March (10.45 a.m. to 12.45 p.m.)

The sitting considered the question of whether parliaments were sufficiently equipped to mainstream the SDGs and the options that existed to make that process as effective as possible. Because each of the SDGs would apply to all countries to one degree or another, all parliaments must be prepared to support their implementation through the legislative and budget processes. The challenge for parliaments was to find a coherent and synergistic way to advance all the SDGs, overcoming the traditional silo approach of committee structure.

As the experience of the parliaments of Germany, Indonesia and Mexico had illustrated, a most effective way to institutionalize the SDGs was for parliament to set up a dedicated informal body, a working group, advisory council or task force. To be effective, that body would need to be composed of members of the substantive committees and be representative of all political parties. It would need to have sufficient authority and resources to commission expert reports, convene hearings, conduct field missions and provide input to the substantive committees.

An informal body would be less difficult to set up from a legal standpoint than a formal committee. Its function, in addition to helping to capture the inter-linkages between the various SDGs, would be to keep the SDGs high on the parliamentary agenda over the entire implementation period to 2030. It would be a means of helping parliaments assume ownership of the SDGs so that they were not seen as a "foreign" agenda cooked up by the United Nations in New York. Indeed, one of its functions would be to promote the SDGs among city councils and local communities, which were increasingly in the lead in sustainable development efforts.

Very clearly, the decision of whether to set up a new structure, and of what type, lay with each parliament alone. Some parliaments reported seeing no need for a dedicated structure for the SDGs. They considered that, in the final analysis, each SDG would fall within the purview of one or more of the standing committees that dealt with substantive policy issues (health, education, etc.). A dedicated body for the SDGs, formal or informal, might end up duplicating efforts. That being said, what mattered most now, when the SDGs had yet to be officially adopted, was that each parliament conducted a review of its own processes and structures, asking the question, "Are we fit for purpose?"